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WHAT A DIFFERENCE THIRTY YEARS MAKE: A PLACE IN THE SUN TODAY

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A major problem in adapting Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* to the screen is the novel's overwhelming detail. Dreiser, seeking verisimilitude, documented everything. Even a television docu-drama lasting three hours for five nights would strain an image-to-image matching (from "dusk of a summer night" at the opening to the same scene at the end), not to mention the dialogue, like Roberta's long letters to Clyde read in the courtroom. Facing this detail--wherein lies much of the power of the novel--the filmmaker must make choices, including how to preserve a sense of relevance to contemporary American life.

For the 1931 film version, social relevance was not a problem because only five years had elapsed since publication of the novel. However, for the 1951 version (filmed mostly in 1949) producer-director George Stevens had to choose whether the setting should be the late 1940's or earlier in the century. The novel itself is vague about time, with specific dates but no years. Even when Judge Oberwaltzer formally reads the death sentence, a dash follows nineteen. With hindsight, one assumes the time is early in the century, contemporaneous with the Gillette trial of 1906, although it could be, without affecting the verisimilitude, anytime before publication. Stevens, wanting not a period piece but truth for audiences of his time, updated costumes, names, factory jobs, modes of transportation, and other details so that the setting

would be consistent with post-World War II and not post-World War I. For a 1951 audience, social customs and folkways had changed so little since Dreiser had written his novel that details of setting matched details of behavior, and few critics at the time raised questions about social relevance. But what was true of the early 1950's is no longer true. In some respects, the loss of relevance for an audience of the 1980's is due to Stevens' focusing on the psychology of love rather than serious social criticism; in other respects, it is due to the nature of Clyde's crime.

Winning six Oscars on its release in 1951, the film was generally regarded as adult cinema which successfully brought Dreiser's novel to the screen, a view which prevailed until fairly recently. The *New York Times* summed up the initial praise: "a work of beauty, tenderness, power, and insight."¹ Even as late as 1964 Murray Schumach could write that Stevens had demonstrated that "artistic fidelity can be box office."² Yet by 1980 *Halliwell's Film Guide* complains that the film, "leaving no time for sociological detail," is an "overblown, overlong, overpraised melodrama." And another of Leslie Halliwell's reference works, acknowledging that the film was once hailed "as one of the greatest films of all time," says, "It is now difficult to see why. Slowly and pretentiously directed . . . its story of a young man's efforts to get into high society at any cost even then [1951] seemed dated and empty."³

Evidence that viewers other than professional critics have trouble finding relevance is the confusion and inaccuracy of the one-sentence summary of the film appearing in standard newspaper listings of movies on TV: "A factory worker plans his future with a wealthy debutante, but in reality he is destined to spend his life with a working girl."⁴ Unless one was aware of the irony of "spend his life," he would hardly want to waste time on such a mediocre plot. Additional confusion over the relevance of the film is in the praise given it by a high school social studies teacher in a review of its release in 16mm in 1977: "No other film shown them this year has generated such animated discussion among my high school students. The ethical complexities of this timeless story raise a number of questions--most notably, the degree to which we are responsible for our intentions as well as our deeds."⁵ If this is the most notable ethical complexity in the film, then it has failed to make much impact. Arguing about intention and deed is an academic conundrum; like discussions of "The Lady or the Tiger," it offers a fascinating dilemma but allows no meaningful conclusions.

Stevens had wanted to bring the "ethical complexities" to the screen and to be faithful to Dreiser's indictment of

American society as the main contributor to the tragedy.⁶ But being practical, he and Paramount knew that 1949 and 1950--when McCarthyism was rife--were bad years for Hollywood to be criticizing the American way of life. He thus shifted emphasis from serious social criticism to the discrepancy between ideal love and reality, a change evidenced by the original script being rewritten and revised, and later rewritten again.⁷

In shaping the film as romantic tragedy, he cast Elizabeth Taylor, the most beautiful young actress available, as Sondra (Angela) and for Clyde (George) chose Montgomery Clift, sensitive, brooding, and handsome. Completing the triangle was Shelly Winters as Roberta (Alice). Miss Winters, who could project animal sexuality, skillfully made audiences turn against her constant nagging and complaining, an interpretation contrary to the novel but which Stevens firmly supported.⁸ By throwing the focus on the tragic love affair rather than on George's wrong-headed social climbing, Stevens lets the murder develop by chance more than by conscious planning. In the film the audience, unable to share George's thought processes as in the novel, gains no insight into how George becomes mentally capable of murder, assuming he ever does. Instead, he is seen in an impossible dilemma brought to a head by chance or fate.

For example, even though the film barely emphasizes the non-fraternizing rule for employees, the viewer soon learns that boy and girl--even with the convenience of an automobile--can find few decent places to be together. On their first date, a nasty customer drives George and Alice away from a neighborhood-type bar. When they park in a pleasant enough lovers' lane, a policeman accosts them with a huge flashlight. When George seduces Alice, it just seems to happen, for as he bids her goodnight, her radio, inside the room, is accidentally turned too high. Running inside to turn it off, he gains access to her bedroom. When finally, at Alice's insistence, he leaves town with her to get married, they find the Marriage License Bureau closed, an unfortunate happenstance suggesting the quirks of fate in *Romeo and Juliet*.

In aiming the drama at the power of love to both destroy and sanctify, Stevens almost overplays his hand when he has Taylor visit Clift in his cell in the death house. Even though her parents have sent her back to boarding school, Angela flies off to George on the eve of the execution, dressed in black, so that he can see for himself what he is losing. To further intensify George's agony, Director Stevens asked Clift to "conjure up some awesome, terrifying emotion in the final close-up" suitable to the occasion, but Clift argued that a man on his way to the electric chair has no expression--he is "numbed, paralyzed, in a state of shock"--and Clift won out.⁹

Nevertheless, the audience reads Clift's mind differently, for superimposed against his last walk are shots which make us believe his mind is not on death but on love: to the accompaniment of romantic background music, one sees Elizabeth Taylor's face in soft-focus floating dreamily above his head. With Stevens' chief theme being the discrepancy between ideal love and reality, the best that can be said for the film is that its characters "are not victims of some particular system but of their own common humanity and their fates are determined by their inherent needs as they seek to fulfill themselves in a world of chance."¹⁰ Put another way, George is an "inwardly confused victim of circumstance."¹¹ If these evaluations of the film, based on its psychological and philosophical themes, sound somewhat vague, it is only because the film, skirting the issues it raises, will permit no more penetrating appraisals.

Although Stevens had tried to give the love theme a universality that would compensate for his not dealing with the so-called "victims of some particular system," he could not wholly escape the social issues which *An American Tragedy* raises. Judith Kass has aptly summed up the extent of social criticism in the film: "Although Stevens does not specifically indict the perversions of American enterprise and misdirected aspirations with the vigor of Dreiser's anti-Horatio Alger ethic, the message is present as background."¹² However, the message stays in the background not only because of the focus on romantic tragedy but also because omissions and changes of emphasis concerning family, religion, class, and the legal system have blunted the social criticism. Abetting this weakening is the novel itself, which offered to Stevens more detail, ambiguities, and out-dated situations than the film could convincingly convey as social criticism.

Since one cannot see the original script and the revisions prepared for Stevens, he cannot know which omissions were made because the story was "too strong" and which because the scope and detail of Dreiser's writing demanded judicious cutting. One area of omission weakening the social concerns involves the instability of Clyde's background. In the film, George's knowing glance at a youth amid a band of street evangelists, intended as a reminder of his own youth, and his telling Angela's father that he quit school at fourteen cannot communicate the handicaps Dreiser painstakingly gave his protagonist--an ineffectual father, a troubled sister, bungled personal relationships, his constant movement from one depressing inner city environment to another, his tendency to run away from trouble.

Religion, so important in the novel, is hardly touched on

in the film. There is an obligatory prison chaplain but no intense Reverend McMillan and no emphasis on his mother's evangelical piety and how it in a sense paralyzed action that might have saved her son. In the novel both of these evangelists concur that he is guilty in the eyes of God because he inwardly intended murder (perhaps like former President Carter, who "lusted in his heart"?). They therefore retreat to a vapid Christian Stoicism as a way of coping. The film glosses over long conversations with Rev. McMillan and his mother on these issues of guilt and redemption. And George does prove to be guilty in intention if not in deed, a safe resolution of the problem in light of the Motion Picture Production Code. For in the film, the chaplain convinces George of his moral guilt by forcing his admission that, when he could have saved Alice, he was actually thinking of his love for Angela.

In the film the rightness of the social structure is taken for granted. George's energy and ambition can only be approved as he is observed working at night on a high-school diploma and a cost-cutting plan for his department at the factory. Also, his social betters rightfully condescend to him; he does not belong with these genteel people until he proves himself. "Easy boy," like a command to a dog, is how Angela's father suavely tries to calm down the emotionally wrought George as he explains his love for Angela and his impoverished background. Because the film approves the existing social and economic order, it necessarily downplays the resemblance of George to his first cousin Earl (Gilbert Griffiths), who, as assistant to his father, is first in line to manage the factory. In the novel Clyde and Gilbert so resemble each other that one can be mistaken for the other. Yet Gilbert, pompous and affected, suffers in comparison with Clyde by everyone knowing them. In the film, Earl's presence has no significance. His resemblance to George "seems merely an explanation for the presence of this awkward young man in these social circles."¹³ The Eastmans and their friends (e.g., Anthony Vickers, Angela's father, played by Sheppard Strudwick) seem taken from central casting as neutral representatives of wealth and good breeding, with no hint of irony intended or implied. The only suggestion in the film that Angela, whom George idolizes, might be a spoiled "rich bitch" is that she drives her convertible too fast. "Third time this summer, isn't it, Miss Vickers?" urges the patrolman in mild reproof.

Although the novel strongly questions whether there is "equal justice under law," the film more cautiously skirts the issue. Stevens at least suggests the trial might be unfair. There is a quick cut to a mob outside the jail looking as if it wants to lynch George, and the District Attorney, bringing the

boat into the courtroom (as in the novel), smashes the oar over the gunwale, while roaring, "You hit her like this!" This melodramatic act, luckily absent from the novel, obviously impresses the stunned jury. But there are no suggestions of the District Attorney's political ambitions timing themselves with the trial, nor of his prejudices against Clyde because of their similarity in background, nor of his assistant's planting strands of Roberta's hair (surreptitiously obtained) in the cover of the camera Clyde was holding.

Just as Dreiser's skillful questioning of the principle of equal justice under law is muted in the film, so is the pre-meditated nature of the crime itself, being difficult to transfer to film. Accordingly, the murder in the film, made even more ambiguous than in the novel, induces irrelevancy, for reforms in the legal system have nullified the probability of a death sentence in such circumstances,¹⁴ and the increasing complexity of modern life has made Clyde as a murderer seem unlike "real" murderers.

Because so many Americans, especially since World War II, have been driven to kill, often in the mass and without motive, Clyde's murder, or murder attempt, seems less compelling in the sense that it was not the work of a deranged sociopath or a calculating and crafty opportunist. Film goes today are used to all kinds of murderers because extensive media coverage of crime has catered to a public eager for details of aberrant social behavior. Not only have the media probed thoroughly into political assassinations, drug-induced butcheries, slaughters by sado-masochists, and hits by the Mafia, but widely read and acclaimed books have come from a variety of authors fascinated by modern criminals, just as Dreiser was by Chester Gillette (1906), Carlyle Harris (1893), and Clarence Richeson (1911). Meyer Levin has skillfully fictionalized Loeb and Leopold's "crime of the century," Truman Capote created a new form for the novel with *In Cold Blood*, about the senseless murder of an upright Kansas farm family, and Norman Mailer won the Pulitzer Prize with his thousand-page *Executioner's Song*, documenting the tortured life of Gary Gilmore from before the murder at the motel until his execution by firing squad nine months later.

Clyde's crime seems mostly irrelevant to conditions that spawn murder today. True, if for no other reason than population pressures, the "rat race" for economic and social status is even more pronounced now than it was in 1925 or 1951, but in the lapse of over half a century, life has become too complex to be encased within a single viewpoint like the American myth of success. Clyde's longings for the good life seem almost naive when compared with the search by youth today

for meaningful identity in a mass society. Clyde, clean-cut and conservative, does not belong with those grotesque yet very human and confused Americans like Perry Smith, Son of Sam, John Henry Abbott, Richard Speck, Charles Starkweather, John Norman Collins, or Lee Harvey Oswald. Charles Manson's cult murders were the subject of *Helter-Skelter*, a 600-page study by the District Attorney who prosecuted him. No District Attorney today would make Clyde Griffiths the subject of a similar book. Clyde lacks the charisma of Charles Manson, whose deeds the English author and philosopher Colin Wilson has compared to the writings of H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937), author of macabre fantasy tales and center of a youthful literary cult.¹⁵ Both reflected the dark side of the human mind, one in deeds and the other in words.

The diversity of American criminals--the world haters, self-haters, and other emotional cripples--as well as the crazy-quilt patterns of their crimes, boggles the mind. One weeps for mankind to read in *In Cold Blood* the biographical sketch of Perry Smith by his father or to learn in *Helter-Skelter* of the desire of Charles Manson's mother to give her infant away, or of Gary Gilmore's begging to be executed. Yet one resists sentimentality. On one level these men are sensitive, intelligent, and misunderstood; on another level they are able to withdraw emotionally and intellectually from comprehending the enormity of their acts.

Clyde, on the other hand, committed a single murder for a clearly defined purpose. He was killing for love, specifically to eliminate an obstacle to romance. In 1974, only six per cent of all American homicides were the direct result of romantic triangles or lovers' quarrels, a remarkably low figure by international standards.¹⁶ Thus, for today's audience, Clyde's crime has little sociological import and certainly lacks the fascination of that "motiveless malignancy" which seemingly characterizes so many killers today.

Besides committing a crime growing out of the affections, Clyde did not seem a criminal type. His childhood was relatively sheltered compared with the unstable upbringings of many youths from broken homes who become criminals. Although surrounded by poverty, an ineffective father, and a somewhat fanatical mother, he did have a family, headed by a woman who preached love and who held her charges together--at least until his sister left home. Clyde was able to hold down jobs, although the film does not disclose his tendency to run away from trouble. In spite of this weakness, Clyde is moral. In neither the novel of 1925 nor the film of 1951 does drinking or drugs become part of his problem. He seems, in fact, almost ascetic, except in his sexuality. Even when he contemplates

murder, he resorts to no crutch to help him cross the line from intention to action, and he does not seem one of those emotionally detached, conscienceless killers so well known today. In the film, no indirect discourse (through voice over) is used, so little is known about how Clyde becomes a potential killer. Even with all the commentary on his thoughts in the novel, Dreiser still had difficulty making credible Clyde's penchant for murder. He partially solved the problem by introducing the image of the giant Efrit, or evil spirit, from the Aladdin's lamp and thereby having Clyde dissociate himself from reality into a fantasy world whenever he thought practically of ending Roberta's life.

Dreiser, of course, did not want a "criminal type." So he made Clyde's planning so inept as to seem self-defeating and his performance of the act itself so ambiguous as to be irrelevant to significant issues like capital punishment. Instead of having Clyde beat Roberta over the head (a bloody tennis racket was found in Chester Gillette's case), Dreiser had him accidentally hit her with his camera, an act which in Dreiser's description of it is not "malice aforethought":

And then, as she drew near him, seeking to take his hand in hers and the camera from him in order to put it in the boat, he flinging out at her, but not even then with any intention to do other than free himself of her Yet (the camera still unconsciously held tight) pushing at her with so much vehemence as not only to strike her lips and nose and chin with it, but to throw her back sidewise toward the left wale which caused the boat to . . . careen to the very water's edge.

Dreiser's ambiguity in creating this scene is one of the novel's most compelling features and has given rise to numerous interpretations regarding the degrees of Clyde's guilt or innocence. For Stevens, however, it was an ambiguity that could not be transferred to film. No director staging this action--whether with long, medium, or close-up shots--could make it seem anything other than a deliberate blow, for physical expressions of shock, surprise, and anger are basically the same, and whether Clyde is "pushing" with the camera or "striking" with it is a moot distinction. Stevens wisely altered the scene to have Alice capsize the boat by rising suddenly to apologize after angering George. In so doing, Stevens made the drowning clearly not murder. That is why Pauline Kael calls the conclusion of the film "bizarre."¹⁷

Thus, in view of reforms and changes in the legal system since the 1920's, Clyde's conviction and execution for this crime, particularly as it was presented by Stevens, seem

implausible to a modern audience. The drowning of Roberta, in fact, has some remarkable parallels with a famous drowning from recent American history--Mary Jo Kopechne's at Poucha Pond on Chappaquiddick Island. The fact that one case was judged a misdemeanor and the other a capital crime is the telling point. Both victims had male companions at the time of their drowning. With Mary Jo was Senator Edward Kennedy, and with Roberta was Clyde. For both men there was another woman in the picture--for Senator Kennedy, his wife, and for Clyde, Sondra. Both victims were loyal, sincere and unassuming.¹⁸ Both drownings occurred unwitnessed by anyone other than the male accompanying the victim. Before the accident (as revealed in subsequent investigations), the male companions acted suspiciously; e.g., Senator Kennedy's turning onto a narrow, unpaved road leading to the fatal bridge and Clyde's registering under a false name at the hotel and his checking out as if not intending to return.

According to the testimony of both men, neither could save his companion, even though both were good swimmers, and both fled the scene of the accident. In neither case could a cause for death other than by drowning be definitely determined: in Roberta's case, because the cuts and bruises on her corpse could not be definitely ascribed to Clyde's agency, and in Mary Jo's case, because no autopsy was performed. Finally, subsequent investigations revealed aberrant behavior by the male companions after the accident. Even though Senator Kennedy never completely accounted for his actions and the elapsed time between the accident and his reporting it, he was convicted of a misdemeanor--leaving the scene of an accident--and given a suspended sentence. If Clyde had immediately reported the affair--whether murder or accident--he would not have been indicted for first-degree murder. If he had wandered off through the woods and had come back to report the accident many hours later (assuming he had not in the meantime seen Sondra), he would have been, at best, cited for leaving the scene of an accident or, at worst, for manslaughter.

Senator Kennedy's political enemies have said of his actions:

'Manslaughter' is the most lenient term that can be used for what happened at Dyke Bridge . . . even if we take into account only what Sen. Kennedy has consented to confess. Knowingly and willingly leaving a human being who might have been rescued to die a slow and tortured death would be considered by many to be, morally if not legally, downright murder.¹⁹

But this was said by his enemies. Senator Kennedy might have

been morally bound to attempt a rescue, but legally he was not. And neither was Clyde. Some might ascribe the leniency shown to Sen. Kennedy, despite his negligence and culpability, to the status of the Kennedy name in Massachusetts and to his being a Senator. Others would say that, unlike Clyde, he lacked motive. Nevertheless, the parallels in the circumstances of the deaths demonstrate that today Clyde would never be convicted of first-degree murder on the basis of the evidence available, whether trumped-up or actual. His case is thus irrelevant to the contemporary social setting.

The climate of McCarthyism was probably not the only factor inhibiting Stevens and the script writers, for they knew that the drowning as a capital crime did not provide enough tough dramatic material to hang social criticism on. So they opted for the tragic dilemma of a love triangle, a theme more dependent on the twists and turns of fate than on character development. Viewers of the film today go mostly to satisfy their curiosity about two famous and youthful screen personalities and about just how Stevens handled filming a famous novel that Eisenstein and Von Sternberg had wrestled with. The value of the film qua film is mostly in its purely filmic elements. Pauline Kael called it "mannered enough for a very fancy Gothic murder mystery."²⁰ Indeed, the refined Gothic images--such as a cozy fireplace giving way in close-up to the fire of Hell or a motor boat sounding like a Stuka dive bomber--unify and add force to the dark themes of murder, its punishment, and planning. However, such images are mood enhancers and add nothing toward understanding what Robert Penn Warren called Clyde's "nightmare self." And the qualities of the film that won it six Academy Awards--for directing, writing, editing, photography, costuming, and score--are not enough to rescue *A Place in the Sun* from a dullness caused by its irrelevance to the contemporary social milieu.

¹A. H. Weiler, 29 August 1951, p. 20.

²*Face on the Cutting Room Floor* (New York: William Morrow, 1964), p. 178 (caption).

³Leslie Halliwell, *Halliwell's Film Guide*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1980) and *Filmgoer's Companion*, 7th ed. (London: Granada, 1980).

⁴*State Journal* (Lansing, Mich.), 25 June 1982. This is the standard tag for *A Place in the Sun* distributed to subscribing newspapers by TV Data Services.

⁵Alan L. Miller, *Film News*, 34 (November-December 1977), 25.

⁶Patricia Bosworth, *Montgomery Clift: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 180.

⁷Bosworth, p. 181.

⁸Bosworth, p. 183.

⁹Bosworth, pp. 187-88.

¹⁰Irving Pichel, "Revivals, Reissues, Remakes and 'A Place in the Sun,'" *Film Quarterly*, 6 (Summer 1952), 393.

¹¹Douglas Brode, *The Films of the Fifties* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1976), p. 57.

¹²Judith M. Kass, *The Films of Montgomery Clift* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1979), p. 127.

¹³Barrie Hayne, "Sociological Treatise, Detective Story, Love Affair: The Film Versions of *An American Tragedy*," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 8 (Fall 1977), 140.

¹⁴For example, the passions for revenge that so affected the outcome of the trial would have been reason enough for a change in venue. But this Constitutional right was not guaranteed until, in 1966, the Supreme Court reversed the conviction of Dr. Sam Sheppard for the murder of his wife in 1954. See Mona G. Rosenman, "An American Tragedy: Constitutional Violations," *The Dreiser Newsletter*, 9 (Spring 1978), 110-19.

¹⁵Colin Wilson, *Order of Assassins* (London: Reyser, Hart-Davis, 1972), 229-33. William V. Thomas writes, "Certainly for the last twenty years Lovecraft has been a cult hero to waves of young readers," his works having been translated into eighteen languages. (See "A Spaced-Out Cult Figure," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 July 1976, p. 10.) Virtually unknown in his lifetime, Lovecraft is coming under close critical scrutiny. (See S. T. Joshi, ed., *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980, pp. 1-19.)

¹⁶John Godwin, *Murder U.S.A.: The Ways We Kill Each Other* (New York: Ballantine, 1978), p. 68.

¹⁷*Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), p. 332.

¹⁸Mary Jo, twenty-eight, a "self-described 'novena Catholic' with a flair for 'mod' clothes . . . , shared a Georgetown house with other Washington career girls, . . . drank moderately but never smoked, disdained vulgar language She seldom dated, although she was mildly attractive" See Jack Olsen, *The Bridge at Chappaquiddick* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 214.

SAME BELL-BOY; DIFFERENT NAMES

P. A. Doyle

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Perhaps only a person with the same surname would be perplexed by the following discrepancy. Relatively early in *An American Tragedy* (Bk 1, Ch 7), "Eddie Doyle" is an attractive hall-boy at the luxurious Green-Davidson Hotel in Kansas City whom Clyde Griffiths admires because of his "Chesterfieldian grace and airs and looks."

Later however, in Bk 2, Ch 6, as Clyde (now in Lycurgus, N.Y.) reminisces about "happier scenes" in Kansas City, and recalls various boys with whom he worked at the Green-Davidson, he remembers "Larry Doyle." Obviously, Dreiser's memory was playing tricks with him, and the editorial proofreader was not alert. Nevertheless, the question arises: why did he settle on the name "Larry"? Is it possible that he confused the name in the later reference with the well-publicized New York Giants second baseman who played fourteen years in the major leagues (1907-1920)? Doyle, who was known by the cognomen "Laughing Larry," was captain of the Giants for several years and played in three World Series. He also played for a time with the Chicago Cubs. Even after his retirement there were frequent references to him in the newspapers because he was a quotable and agreeable personality. Still later he received frequent news attention because of a lengthy bout with tuberculosis.

If Dreiser was writing quickly and wool-gathering a bit, having forgotten the earlier "Eddie," the Christian name that would most easily emerge from his subconscious as a result of newspaper stories and general reading knowledge would be "Larry."

DREISER AND RANDOM HOUSE

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The most spectacular failure in American publishing between 1900 and 1950 was the collapse of Horace Liveright, Inc., in 1933. The flamboyant Liveright was one of the most successful and visible publishers of the twenties, but he speculated on several Broadway productions that failed, and he lost heavily on the stock market. His publishing house was almost always overextended, but he had good luck for a time with such bestsellers as Hendrik Van Loon's *The Story of Man-kind*, Samuel Hopkins Adams's *Flaming Youth*, Gertrude Atherton's *Black Oxen*, and Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. All of these books helped keep his firm afloat through difficult periods. He made a serious mistake in 1925, however, when he sold the profitable Modern Library series to Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer for \$200,000. Liveright was not much interested in the Modern Library and he needed capital; Cerf and Klopfer recognized how successful the series could be if managed properly.¹

By 1932, the house of Liveright was in serious trouble. Liveright himself had been removed from his position of financial responsibility in July 1930, and rumors of the impending collapse of the firm had been abroad in the New York publishing world for some time. The four biggest Liveright authors, the stars of the list, were Eugene O'Neill, Robinson Jeffers, Theodore Dreiser, and Sherwood Anderson. When it became apparent that the house was going to go into receivership, various New York publishers began to court these writers. There were other good Liveright authors, but O'Neill, Jeffers, Dreiser, and Anderson were the prizes.

As it turned out, Cerf and Klopfer signed the first two of these four authors. The Modern Library had done well for Cerf and Klopfer, but it was essentially a reprint series. The two men wanted to move into more creative publishing. They had been issuing limited signed editions since the late twenties, and they had also produced some handsome collector's editions of books like *Candide*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Divine Comedy*. Cerf and Klopfer, by now calling their operation Random House, next wanted to do some speculative literary publishing. They planned to stay small and concentrate on only a few good

authors. The company was financially sound; losses on high-risk literary titles could always be recovered from Modern Library receipts. Random House also had built up a good distribution network for the Modern Library and could use this same network for its trade titles. O'Neill and Jeffers apparently recognized the advantages of being with such a house and signed on during the summer of 1933.

At this juncture, Cerf and Klopfer seem to have given serious thought to pursuing Dreiser as well. Klopfer even went so far as to compose an exploratory letter to TD and have it typed up. For some reason, though, the letter was never sent. It was saved and today is preserved in the Random House Archive at the Butler Library, Columbia University. It is facsimiled on the facing page. The letter was not folded: some time between its typing and insertion into an envelope, Klopfer and Cerf changed their minds. One of them pencilled "NOT SENT" across the top of the letter and filed it away.

Why was the letter not mailed? Dreiser had not yet signed with another publisher and would not do so until September 1934, when he would go with Simon and Schuster.² He was still available and might well have given serious attention to an offer from Random House. It would have been a coup if Cerf and Klopfer, new boys on the block, could have acquired the most important playwright, poet, and novelist from the Liveright stable. Yet the two men backed off. Why?

The answer appears to be that Cerf had a strong personal aversion to Dreiser. In his posthumously published memoirs, *At Random*, Cerf recalls his first meeting with TD. Cerf wanted to get into the publishing business, and as a favor to Liveright (under whom he would shortly become a vice president) Cerf agreed to take Dreiser to a baseball game. Dreiser was on his worst behavior that day: years later Cerf remembered him as "dour, sulky, unpleasant."³ After he went to work for Liveright, Cerf had other dealings with Dreiser. "He was one of the most churlish, disagreeable men I ever met in my life, always thinking that everybody was cheating him," recalled Cerf. "He'd come in about every three months to examine the ledger to see whether his royalty statements were correct. We soon discovered Dreiser didn't know what he was doing. He'd make a great pretense of checking, but he was just trying to scare us into being honest. He'd make little marks against all the items he'd examined and then he'd go out for lunch and we'd rub all the marks off, and when he came back he wouldn't even notice" (*At Random*, pp. 35-36).

Nearly all writers are troublesome, of course, and many are mistrustful of publishers. O'Neill, in fact, was not



RANDOM HOUSE

20 E 57 · NEW YORK

The American Selling Agent for the NONESUCH PRESS Limited Editions

NOT SENT

June 20, 1933.

Mr. Theodore Dreiser.
Hotel Ansonia,
73rd St. & Broadway,
New York City.

Dear Mr. Dreiser:

It is now definite that we have the rights to publish both Eugene O'Neill and Robinson Jeffers. I am therefore submitting the following proposition to you with a view to publishing all of your past and future books.

We will keep all of your books in print, and pay you a royalty of 15% of the retail price on all the sales made of these books, with the exception of the reprint editions which have already been contracted for, and which would be worked on a basis similar to your present contract. We would pay you a \$5000.00 advance on your new novel, which we understand is to be published in the Fall, with an option to publish your next book on payment of a similar advance, after the publication of this novel.

The advantages to you in coming to Random House under this arrangement would be:

It is our intention to have a very small and extremely select list on which the only two names at present are Eugene O'Neill and Robinson Jeffers. We have complete distribution facilities due to the Modern Library, and complete financial responsibility. In other words, there would be a concentrated effort to sell your books, and your association would be only with authors of the highest degree, into which category you yourself fit so nicely.

These are just the barest outlines of any contract that we would make, but I feel sure that there will be no stumbling blocks in a contract which will be agreeable both to yourself and ourselves, predicated on the above general terms.

Cordially yours,

Donald S. Klopfer
RANDOM HOUSE

dsk:pk

always an easy author for Cerf to handle, nor was Jeffers.⁴ But Cerf was more than ordinarily wary of Dreiser, probably because he had been present at the famous luncheon at the Ritz during which Dreiser dashed a cup of hot coffee in Liveright's face. Cerf must have decided that he wanted no dealings with such an author.⁵

Nevertheless, it is significant that Klopfer (with Cerf's knowledge, one must assume) went so far as to compose a "feeler" to Dreiser and have it typed up. What would have happened had the letter been sent? Would Dreiser eventually have gone with Random House? It is difficult to know. The offer--a straight 15% of retail--was excellent for the time. Indeed, it would be very good today. O'Neill was getting a straight 20% royalty, plus other concessions, on his new contract with Random House; probably Dreiser could have pushed his own percentage to a similar level.⁶ There were other matters that would have needed straightening out. Dreiser's past history with publishers, contracts, and advances was tangled, but Klopfer implied in his letter that Random House would be willing to tackle those problems.⁷ Klopfer and Cerf were both Jews: Dreiser's anti-Semitism might have made him reluctant to go with Random House, but Liveright was a Jew, and Richard Simon and Max Schuster, with whom Dreiser would sign, were both Jewish.⁸

Dreiser, then, might actually have ended up at Random House had the letter been posted. Whether Cerf and Klopfer could have kept him happy and productive is another matter. Cerf appears to have vetoed the letter, deciding to wait a bit longer and see whether he and Klopfer might pick up another prominent American novelist, one less cantankerous than Dreiser. Cerf's hesitation paid off. In 1936, he and Klopfer were able to sign William Faulkner when the firm of Smith & Haas merged with Random House. The arrangement included publishing rights to all of Faulkner's books after *Sartoris*. The Faulkner-Random House association proved a lasting one; Faulkner remained with the firm for the rest of his career. Still, for a few days in June 1933, Cerf and Klopfer contemplated pursuing Dreiser. One wonders what might have happened, what different turns Dreiser's literary career might have taken, had they succeeded in signing him.

¹The best account of Liveright's career is Walker Gilmer, *Horace Liveright: Publisher of the Twenties* (New York: David Lewis, 1970). For a briefer sketch of the history of the firm, see "Liveright, Seltzer, and the Bonis" in Charles A. Madison, *Book Publishing in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill,

1966), pp. 330-38. Gordon B. Neavill is preparing a history of the Modern Library; see his two articles "The Modern Library Series and American Cultural Life," *Journal of Library History*, 16 (Spring 1981), 241-52, and "The Modern Library Series: Format and Design, 1917-1977," *Printing History*, 1 (1979), 26-37.

²Dreiser's contract with Simon and Schuster, dated 28 Sept. 1934, is among the Dreiser Papers at the University of Pennsylvania. See W. A. Swanberg, *Dreiser* (New York: Scribner's, 1965), pp. 423 ff., for details of the agreement and an account of the relationship.

³*At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 29.

⁴O'Neill became quite angry in 1936 because he felt (mistakenly, as it turned out) that Random House had not taken commercial advantage of his winning the Nobel Prize. Some correspondence ensued; it is in Box 97A of the Random House Archive at Columbia. Jeffers tangled with Random House editor Saxe Commins over his volume of poems *The Double Axe* (1948). See James Shebl, *In This Wild Water* (Pasadena: Ward Ritchie Press, 1976).

⁵For Cerf's account of the event, see *At Random*, pp. 58-59.

⁶Rough and final drafts of the contract between O'Neill and Random House are at Columbia. The major provisions were that O'Neill was to receive a 20% royalty on the retail price of books sold at 50% discount or less, and 20% of net on books sold at a discount of greater than 50%. O'Neill received a \$10,000 advance on two plays, book-club proceeds were to be split 70-30 in O'Neill's favor (a 50-50 division was then standard), and O'Neill retained all British and translation rights. No mention is made in the contract of motion picture rights.

⁷For a summary, see Charles A. Madison, "Dreiser's Troubles with Publishers," in *Irving to Irving: Author-Publisher Relations, 1800-1974* (New York: Bowker, 1974), pp. 94-110.

⁸See Madison, "Jews in American Publishing," *Chicago Jewish Forum*, 26 (Summer 1968), 282-87.

A DREISER CHECKLIST, 1982

Frederic E. Rusch
Indiana State University

This checklist covers the year's work on Dreiser in 1982 plus a number of publications omitted from previous checklists. I wish to thank Shigeo Mizuguchi for providing the information on Dreiser studies published in Japan.

I. NEW EDITIONS, TRANSLATIONS AND REPRINTS OF DREISER'S WORKS

American Diaries 1902-1926. Ed. Thomas P. Riggio. Gen. ed. Neda Westlake. Textual ed. James L. W. West III. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

Jennie Gerhardt. Introd. Helen Yglesias. New York: Schocken Books, 1982.

"Theodore Dreiser," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series: An Illustrated Chronicle*. Vol. 1. Ed. Margaret A. Van Antwerp. Detroit: Gale Research, 1982, pp. 165-238. Rpts. 8 letters, 3 interviews and excerpts from a newspaper article; includes photographs of ms. pages.

II. NEW DREISER STUDIES AND NEW STUDIES THAT INCLUDE DREISER

Akiyama, Takeo. "Shiodoa Doraisa [Theodore Dreiser] (1871-1945) *Shisuta Kyari* [*Sister Carrie*] (1900)," in *Amerika Bungaku o Yomu: 30 Kai* [*Reading American Literature: 30 Chapters*]. Tokyo: Taiyo-sha, 1981, pp. 158-59.

_____. "Shiodoa Doraisa [Theodore Dreiser] (1871-1945) *Shihonka* [*The Financier*] (1912)," in *Amerika Bungaku o Yomu: 30 Kai* [*Reading American Literature: 30 Chapters*]. Tokyo: Taiyo-sha, 1981, pp. 160-61.

Ando, Shoichi. *Shiodoa Doraisa--Sono Kyoze to Jitsuzo* [Theodore Dreiser: His False Image and Real Image], in *Amerika Bungaku no Jikokeisei* [Self-Formation of American Literature]. Ed. Toshihiko Ogata. Kyoto: Yamaguchi-shoten, 1981, pp. 195-231.

- Andrews, Clarence A. *Chicago in Story: A Literary History*.
Iowa City: Midwest Heritage Pub. Co., 1982, pp. passim.
- Benediktsson, Thomas E. *George Sterling*. Boston: Twayne,
1980, pp. 55-56, et passim.
- Bernheim, Mark. "Florida: The Permanence of America's Idyll,"
Modernist Studies: Literature and Culture 1920-1940, 4
(1982), 125-45.
- Brazil, John R. "Murder Trials, Murder, and Twenties America,"
American Quarterly, 33 (1981), 163-84.
- Campbell, Hilbert H. "Dreiser in New York: A Diary Source,"
Dreiser Newsletter, 13 (Fall 1982), 1-7.
- Chanda, A. K. "The Young Man from the Provinces,"
Comparative Literature, 33 (1981), 321-41.
- Dowell, Richard W. "Dreiser's Debt to His Contemporaries,"
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- Fisher, Philip. "Acting, Reading, Fortune's Wheel: *Sister Carrie* and the Life History of Objects," in *American Realism: New Essays*. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist.
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982, pp. 259-77.
- Flanagan, John T. "A Decade of Middlewestern Autobiography,"
Centennial Review, 26 (1982), 115-33.
- Gerber, Philip L. "Cowperwood Treads the Boards," *Dreiser Newsletter*, 13 (Fall 1982), 8-17.
- Gobel, Walter. "Schreckbild Stadt: Chicago im naturalistischen Roman [The City as Nightmare: Chicago in the Naturalist Novel]," *LiLi: Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, 12, no. 48 (1982), 88-102.
- Griffin, Joseph. "Dreiser Experiments with Form: Five Stories from *Chains*," *English Studies in Canada*, 8 (1982), 174-86.
- Higuchi, Hideo. "Dreiser on the Jews or 'Is Dreiser Anti-Semitic,'" *Amerika Kenkyu* [*The American Review*], 16 (1982), 88-104, 265-67.
- Hirsh, John C. "Tragic America: Dreiser's American Communism and a General Motors Executive," *Dreiser Newsletter*, 13 (Spring 1982), 10-16.

- Hochman, Barbara. "Self-Image and Moral Judgment in *Sister Carrie*," *Hebrew University Studies in Literature*, 10 (1982), 108-37.
- Hogel, Rolf. "Chicago, 1880-1900: Seine Darstellung in Theodore Dreiser's Roman *Sister Carrie*," *Der fremdsprachliche Unterricht*, 57 (1981), 17-26.
- Homma, K. "Tokuda Shusei and Theodore Dreiser: A Comparative Study," *Doshisha Literature*, 30 (1982), 68-90.
- Kaelin, E. F. "Language as a Medium for Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 40 (1981), 121-30.
- Klotz, Gunther. "Aspects of Individualism in the American Novel at the Turn of the Century," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 30 (1982), 226-31.
- Koster, Donald N. *American Literature and Language: A Guide to Information Sources*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1982, pp. 77-80.
- Lindberg, Gary. *The Confidence Man in American Literature*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982, pp. 107-12, et passim.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. "Dreiser's *Financier*: The Man of Business as a Man of Letters," in *American Realism: New Essays*. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982, pp. 278-95.
- Morace, Robert A. "Dreiser's Contract for *Sister Carrie*: More Fact and Fiction," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 9 (1982), 305-11.
- Muller, Kurt. "Die Dreiserforschung der siebziger Jahre: Tendenzen und Perspektiven," *Amerikastudien*, 26 (1981), 109-18.
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- Murayama, Kiyohiko. "Shioda Doraisa [Theodore Dreiser] (1871-1945) *Amerika no Higeki* [An American Tragedy] (1925)," in *Amerika Bungaku o Yomu: 30 Kai* [Reading American Literature: 30 Chapters]. Tokyo: Taiyo-sha, 1981, pp. 182-83.

- Orlov, Paul A. "Plot as Parody: Dreiser's Attack on the Alger Theme in *An American Tragedy*," *American Literary Realism 1870-1910*, 15 (1982), 239-43.
- Poenicke, Klaus. *Der Amerikanische Naturalismus: Crane, Norris, Dreiser*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982.
- Revitch, Eugene and Louis B. Schlesinger. *Psychopathology of Homicide*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1982, pp. 99-100.
- Saeki, Michikazu. "Toride no Aironi [An Irony over *The Bulwark*]," *Studies in Foreign Languages and Cultures (Japan)*, 5 (1981), 47-67.
- Salzman, Jack. "Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945)," in *A Bibliographical Guide to Midwestern Literature*. Ed. Gerald Nemanic. Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1981, pp. 187-92.
- Schonfelder, Karl-Heinz. "From Benjamin Franklin to Frank Algernon Cowperwood: Changes in the Image of the American Businessman," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 30 (1982), 213-18.
- Singh, Brij Mohan. "Dreiser's First Short Story: 'McEwen of the Shining Slave Makers': A Composite Study," *Panjab University Research Bulletin (Arts)*, 13 (Apr. 1982), 21-29.
- Tucker, B. D. and Philip Williams. *Invitation to American Literature*. Annotated by Tajiro Kiwayama. Tokyo: Yumi Press, 1980, pp. 69-72.
- Watts, Emily Stipes. *The Businessman in American Literature*. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1982, pp. 58-65, et passim.
- Weixlmann, Joe. *American Short-Fiction Criticism and Scholarship, 1959-1977: A Checklist*. Athens: Swallow Press (Ohio Univ. Press), 1982, pp. 141-44.
- West, James L. W., III. "Dreiser and the B. W. Dodge Sister Carrie," *Studies in Bibliography*, 35 (1982), 323-31.
- White, Ray Lewis. "Sherwood Anderson and *The American Spectator Conference: Dictators and Drink*," *American Notes & Queries*, 15 (Sept. 1976), 6-9.

Wolstenholme, Susan. "Brother Theodore, Hell on Women," in *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Fritz Fleischmann. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982, pp. 243-64.

Zlotnick, Joan. *Portrait of an American City: The Novelists' New York*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1982, pp. 61-67, 119.

Averev, Aleksei Matveevich. *Amerikanskii roman 20-kh--30-kh godov* [*The American Novel of the Twenties and Thirties*] Moskva: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1982.

III. REPRINTS OF EARLIER DREISER STUDIES

Kazin, Alfred. "Two Educators: Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser," in *On Native Grounds*. New York: Harcourt, 1942. Rpt. San Diego: Harcourt, 1982.

"Theodore Dreiser," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series: An Illustrated Chronicle*. Vol. 1. Ed. Margaret A. Van Antwerp. Detroit: Gale Research, 1982, pp. 165-238. Rpts. 13 reviews, one tribute and one obituary.

IV. ABSTRACTS OF DISSERTATIONS AND THESES ON AND INCLUDING DREISER

Gallagher, Mary Kathleen. "From Natty to Bigger: The Innocent Criminal in American Fiction," *DAI*, 43 (1982), 167A (U. North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

Hochman, Barbara Ann. "The Moral Realism of Theodore Dreiser," *DAI*, 43 (1982), 163A (State U. of New Jersey, New Brunswick).

Kaplan, Amy Beth. "Realism against Itself: The Urban Fictions of Twain, Howells, Dreiser, and Dos Passos," *DAI*, 43 (1982), 169A (Johns Hopkins).

Limon, John Keith. "Imagining Science: The Influence and Metamorphosis of Science in Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne," *DAI*, 42 (1982), 5122A-23A (U. Cal, Berkeley).

Mukherjee, Arun Prabha. "Pursuit of Wealth as a Quest Metaphor in the American Novel: A Study of Dreiser and Some of His Contemporaries," *DAI*, 42 (1982), 4450A (Toronto).

Smith, Herbert Joseph, Jr. "From Stereotype to Acculturation: The Irish-American's Fictional Heritage from Brackenridge to Farrell," *DAI*, 41 (1980), 1600A (Kent State).

DREISER NEWS & NOTES

On August 31, Dr. Neda Westlake, Curator of the Dreiser Collection at the University of Pennsylvania, retired. Over a thirty-five-year association with that material, Dr. Westlake has given direction and encouragement to countless students of Dreiser. Her courtesy, infinite patience and thorough knowledge of the Dreiser Collection will be sorely missed. . . . Dr. Joseph Griffin's *The Small Canvas: An Introduction to Dreiser's Short Stories* is scheduled for publication this Spring by the Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. Dr. Griffin indicates that his book "studies the published short fiction with individual chapters on *Free and Other Stories* (1918), *Chains* (1927) and the later uncollected stories. The approach is critical (story by story) with attention given to publication history and sources." . . . On March 18, Mayen, Germany, the birthplace of John Paul Dreiser, dedicated its city library to Theodore Dreiser, "Theodore-Dreiser-Haus." An account of the ceremony will appear in the Spring 1985 issue of the *DW*. . . . Frederic E. Rusch, *DW* bibliographer, has received his Ph.D. from the University of Leeds. His dissertation was a critical edition of Dreiser's *Hand of the Potter*.

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Doyle, P.A. *Same Bell-Boy; Different Names*. XV:ii, 12.

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REVIEWS

Dowell, Richard, James L. W. West III, and Neda Westlake eds. *An Amateur Laborer* (Reviewed by Thomas P. Riggio). XV:i, 10.

Hussman, Lawrence E., Jr. *Dreiser and His Fiction* (Reviewed by Philip L. Gerber). XIV:ii, 16.

The Works of Theodore Dreiser in Twenty Volumes. Kyoto Japan: Rinsen Book Co., 1981 (Reviewed by Neda Westlake). XIV:i, 10.

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